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THE BURNING OF COLUMBIA.

[General Sherman, in response to suggestions that he should take some notice of recent utterances of Gen. Wade Hampton in the United States Senate, declines any controversy with Gen. Wade Hampton or any body else, about the origin of the fire which destroyed the heart of Columbia, S. C., during the night of February 17, 1865.

The case has been authoritatively concluded by the judgment of the mixed Commission on American and British Claims under the treaty with Great Britain, composed of Count Corti, of Italy; Honorable Russell Gurney, M. P., of London, and Honorable Jas. I. Fraser, of Indiana, in favor of the United States.

All the testimony is published in the cases Wood and Heyworth vs. United States, and of Cowlam Graveley vs. United States, copies of which can doubtless be had on application to the State Department at Washington.

General Sherman, in his testimony therein fully reported, under cross-examination, explained why Wade Hampton felt so restless under the strictures that were made upon his defense of his home and fireside, after having defied the invaders.

General Sherman states that if General Wade Hampton seeks a controversy, he can have it by addressing Capt. A. E. Wood, 4th U. S. Cavalry, at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, a copy of whose recent letter here follows.—ALLEN THORNDIKE RICE.]

FORT HUACHUCA, ARIZONA,
February 13, 1888.

GENERAL W. T. SHERMAN:

SIR: I notice by the late papers that General Wade Hampton is out in another tirade against you, wherein he accuses you of burning Columbia, S. C.

For the past twenty years I have noticed these periodical attacks, but I have never written you, giving my positive knowledge of the facts in the case, for the reason that ever since 1868 I have either been a cadet at the military academy or an officer in the regular army; and as you have been in command of the army until within the last few years, a letter to you, under the circumstances would seem like currying favor, a thing which my most intimate friends can never accuse me of doing. But now, since you have nothing to do with the active army, I can write you

with that fullness of friendship which active warfare begets between the soldier and his successful commander.

During the war I belonged to the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, 17th Army Corps. This brigade consisted of four Iowa regiments, viz.: 11th, 13th, 15th and 16th Regiments. I belonged to Co. "F" 13th Iowa.

The Saluda and Broad rivers form a junction a very little above the City of Columbia, S. C., and the main stream is called the Congaree. Logan was laying the pontoons across the two rivers above mentioned when the brigade to which I belonged arrived at the banks of the Congaree, opposite the city. The State House was on the ridge, probably three-quarters of a mile and a little down the stream from us. From the top of this ridge, where the State House was located, to the water's edge, the ground sloped more abruptly at first, then more gently, until within a quarter of a mile of the river, where the slope was scarcely perceptible, making what we usually term a "flat." On the edge of this "flat," farthest from the river, and below us, the railroad depot was located. We were about west of the city, and could see everything to the top of the ridge.

The depot was burning when we came in sight, and long before a "Yankee" soldier could get across the river. General Belknap commanded the division, but he sent word to our brigade asking for volunteers to cross the Congaree in boats if we could find them. Everybody volunteered, and we commenced hunting for boats. The regiment finding the first good boat was to have the honor of crossing first. The Fifteenth Iowa men found a flat-boat first, but it went under water when the men commenced filing in. My regiment found a good flat-boat which carried about twenty-five men at a trip. I was in the first boatload. We landed a short distance below an old mill which was occupied by some of Hampton's cavalry. Of course they vacated very quickly and left us in possession. When about seventy-five men of my regiment had crossed, Lieutenant-Colonel J. C. Kennedy deployed us as skirmishers, and we started straight for the State House. Logan was still laying his pontoons. After firing a very few shots at Hampton's men, after we got in the city, we reached the State House and planted our colors. Logan received the Mayor's surrender at the other end of the city at least two hours after we put our colors on the State House.

I am thus particular, because I wish to show that we were the first "Yankee" soldiers in Columbia, and consequently we can tell something about the fire. Most of the city was built along the ridge and to the east of it. There were streets laid out and residence houses constructed on the slope towards the river, but few if any of them continued to the "flat." The skirmish line kept in very good shape until we reached the city, where we broke up into parties and traversed the streets, the State House always being the objective point. I was with a squad of men who went up a street which ran parallel to the one leading to the State House, and probably two or three blocks from it. As soon we reached the top of the ridge we took a cross street which went directly towards the State House, and I saw our flag raised about the time I reached the top of the ridge. In going up this street towards the top of the ridge we passed a long pile of baled cotton, and this was on fire in two or three places when we reached it. None but Hampton's men or the citizens of the place could have set fire to this cotton. The cotton was piled probably three bales high, a little nearer the north side of the street than the middle, in order to leave a roadway. As to how long the pile of cotton was I now can give no estimate, but the impression left on my boyish mind was that it was immense. The wind was blowing not a hurriance but a very stiff gale from the west, although the sky was perfectly clear. My service in Texas, New Mexico, Indian Territory, Kansas and Nebraska since then has made me more familiar with severe winds than I was at that time, and still by comparison I must call it a *very* heavy wind storm. I thought while passing this cotton that the severe wind would certainly drive the fire into some of those houses, and it did so, for this was the first part of the city that took fire. The fire did not get into the main part of the city until about dark, and did not reach the State House until about one o'clock A.M. In the meantime, I, with many others, tried our best to stop the conflagration and help the women and children rescue the few household effects that it was possible to get out of the burning houses.

The arms of my regiment were stacked in the State House yard, and until the house took fire I was continually in the close proximity of the fire, rendering such assistance as I could to the inhabitants, and during all this time I did not see a single act of vandalism by any of our men. We had no sentiment of kindness

for the people of Columbia, because it was the capital of the state which did the most to bring on the war; but our feelings of humanity did not allow us to be indifferent spectators of the sufferings of the women and children, much less to aggravate those sufferings by acts of barbarism. I distinctly remember that it was the general talk among the men that the city took fire from the burning cotton, and we all knew that Wade Hampton's men set fire to the cotton. After the fire got started it propagated itself. I saw flaming shingles carried over a hundred yards by the wind. It was in this manner that the fire, to use a Western phrase, "jumped the streets" without hindrance. When the old State House took fire it burned like tinder, and the heat from it was intense, destroying many dressed stones that were lying in the yard prepared for the new State House, which was in course of construction at the time.

Columbia was of no importance to us; it was only a halting place for the night. Johnston's army was our objective, and we reached it in a few days. Wade Hampton knows as surely as he is a living man that his command set fire to that cotton, and indirectly burned down the city of Columbia, and his reiterations of innocence convince me not only of his consciousness of guilt but also of a personal motive, be that what it may.

I will say one word about what was known as "Sherman's Bummers." From what has been said upon the subject I infer that those who never saw the army under your command have an idea that "Sherman's Bummers" were a class of men who revered nothing, destroyed everything, and were barbarous in the extreme. This idea has probably been somewhat strengthened by the veteran himself, as he narrates his exploits while sitting, with his children around him, in front of a pleasant fireplace, during the long winter evenings. The circumstances of age, length of time, distance from the scene of action and frequent repetition, are all calculated to give wings to the imagination, and what was once a truth is now a hyperbole. The Bummer proper, the man that was known as such at the time, was perfectly brave, of fine practical intelligence, a man full of resource, and whose affections were bound up in the company to which he belonged. "Sherman's Bummers" were men detailed—two from each company of infantry—for the purpose of securing food for their comrades and forage for the animals. Every morning the company details reported to regimental

headquarters, and from there they reported to brigade headquarters, etc. Each brigade organization was ordered to scout a certain area of country for food and forage, bringing the fruit of their labors to a certain place, which was always to be the camp for the coming night. They mounted themselves as best they could ; they found grist mills and set them to grinding ; they took such wagons, carts or buggies, horses, mules, oxen or donkeys as they could find, to the camps. It was a life of unceasing toil and danger. The enemy's cavalry was in the country, and the men often had to fight for what they got. They were ordered, upon hearing the report of a musket or cannon, to go for the place as fast as they could travel. Often, when the enemy attacked two or three men, in the course of twenty minutes one would have a hundred dare devils after him. As a rule, a brave man is not cruel. These men committed no atrocities. They took what the necessities of the case and the rules of war allowed them. From a humanitarian standpoint war is cruel, it cannot be otherwise ; but the cruelties of our Civil War were far less in number and smaller in degree than those of any other war during the century preceding it.

"Sherman's Bummers" did not set fire to Columbia, for the river prevented their passage, and knowing that we should get possession of the town in a few hours, they joined their respective companies before any of the troops passed over, and remained with them until the next day.

I authorize you to use this letter as you may think best.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

A. E. Wood,

Captain Fourth Cavalry.

Certified a true copy.

W. T. SHERMAN, General.